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ABSTRACT

The Cambridge Rindge and Latin School in Cambridge (Massachusetts) has developed a School-Juvenile Court Liaison Program. Central to the effectiveness of this program is the appointment of a school staff member who fills the role of a liaison or "linking mechanism" between the school and court. The overall objective for the liaison is to increase communication and sharing of information between the school and court. To accomplish this goal, the liaison is in constant contact with the activities of the court as they involve students and advocates on behalf of students in all court situations. The liaison attends court hearings; coordinates conferences between the student, family, and court staff; and makes recommendations to the court for special support services for the student. The goals of the project and tasks of the liaison are detailed in this bulletin as well as information on how to get such a project started. (Author/MLF)

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Technical Assistance Bulletin 31

School Court Liaison Program: The Cambridge Model

Summary

Schools and courts throughout the nation, despite common concerns and goals, have traditionally operated as separate, isolated, and sometimes hostile systems. The Cambridge Rindge and Latin School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is attempting to change this problem of separatism through development of a School-Juvenile Court Liaison Program. Central to the effectiveness of this program is the appointment of a school staff member who fills the role of a liaison or "linking mechanism" between the school and court. The overall objective for the liaison is to increase communication and sharing of information between the school and court. To accomplish this goal, the liaison is in constant contact with the activities of the court as they involve students and advocates on behalf of students in all court situations. The liaison attends court hearings; coordinates conferences between the student, family, and court staff; and makes recommendations to the court for special support services for the student. The goals of the project and tasks of the liaison are detailed in this bulletin as well as information on how to get such a project started.

The Problem

Although it is difficult to prove a causal relationship, it is significant that many acts of juvenile delinquency are committed by habitual school truants and school dropouts. Despite this correlation, both the school and the court have traditionally operated as separate, autonomous, isolated, and in some instances, hostile systems--each with its own distinctive goals, values, and expectations. There are many reasons why this is so. The school often lacks a collaborative relationship with the court because school officials' are unfamiliar with, and reluctant to get involved in, the juvenile justice system. In addition, the school's administrative structure often does not provide for a well-defined liaison role. The court, for its part, suffers from an organizational structure which does not easily facilitate a linkage with the school. The jurisdiction of the court may encompass one or several different school districts which may or may not be in close proximity. Court personnel are themselves burdened by excessive supervisory caseloads and frequently become frustrated when dealing with unknown school officials in unfamiliar school systems.

However, in a general way, basic commonalities do exist between the school and court. Both systems are mandated to serve the same population, and have as their ultimate responsibilities that of developing self-respecting, responsible citizens; controlling and preventing disruption and delinquency and dealing with problem youth. (For further information, see M. Koppenhager, "School-Juvenile Court Interface: Expanding the Role of the Juvenile Court," NSRN National Center Compendium, 1979.)

The problem of school-court separatism raises a key question. Is there a mechanism or linking tool that can be created to bring the school and court together, to reduce the isolation and duplication of effort, increase cooperation and communication, and, in so doing, benefit the shared concern for both agencies--the student?

The Solution

In 1979 the Cambridge Rindge and Latin School (CRLS) in Cambridge, Massachu-

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setts, instituted a Juvenile Court Project (see Attachment A) as part of the services offered by their Student Service Project. The Juvenile Court Project provides a direct link between the school and Probation Department of the Court, and advocates for students in court-related situations. A school-court liaison heads the project and is the actual linking mechanism between the school and court. The liaison works with the court on a day-to-day basis and is in contact with any student involved in court and their families. The liaison advocates for what is best for the student, and makes recommendations on the student's behalf from the school's point of view. Furthermore, the liaison evaluates what the school can do for the student, which increases the likelihood of success when the student returns to school.

The liaison's tasks include the following:

- Meets students at the court setting to provide support
- Demonstrates concern for their status
- Asks them what the school can do to meet their needs
- Holds discussions with students, parents, and probation officers in order to build an awareness of the needs of the student and to work cooperatively toward obtaining services from the school or community which may benefit the student
- Speaks up for students in their behalf when appropriate or asks other school officials to be present in order to do so
- Uses this opportunity to check on the appropriateness of the student's school program--the student's success, attendance record, and social adjustment in school
- Recommends programmatic changes, if necessary, and informs school staff who are involved in the process
- Promotes and facilitates students' return to school and helps make school a desirable option
- Encourages students' regular attendance at and participation in school
- Monitors attendance and school progress thereafter and suggests support services, special activities, or opportunities where necessary
- Helps mediate conflicts, if necessary, between the student and school staff, other students, or the parents
- Conducts individual and group advising sessions as appropriate
- Attends court proceedings and conferences with court staff as appropriate
- Confers with student, parent/guardian and probation officers at the court setting to establish advocacy relationship
- Facilitates the school's completing the required school report forms for the court staff
- Aids the court staff in contacting appropriate school staff when necessary
- Acts as an available resource for court staff about school programs and services
- Keeps court staff informed about the school progress of students being supervised
- Offers suggestions about school support services
- Processes all CHINS* (truancy and habitual school offender) petitions brought on behalf of the school.

*CHINS petitions are a tool through which the school can seek help for students and often, as a result, their families, by making available the battery of services offered by the court. These types of petitions are found in most states but may be identified by different acronyms (e.g., New York--PINS=Persons in Need of Services).

The school-court liaison plays a vital role in changing the relationship between the school and the court, and ultimately delivering better services for the student. With the liaison in an advocacy position for the student, new decisions and choices for the student can be made. With both systems (the court and school) working together, new perspectives can be gained for the best way to deal with problem youth. In addition, the school is extending its role by clearly showing an interest and dedication in working for all students.

A Case Example

A 16-year old tenth grade boy at CRLS was suspected of stealing for the third time. The youth had been in court before, and had been warned by the principal that if he was suspected a third time, the school would initiate a court referral. The school did enact a referral when the alleged incident occurred, and at this time, the school-court liaison became involved in the case. Meetings were held with the student, his parents, and the court staff. At a final group conference, the liaison recommended that the youth be placed in the school's self-contained classrooms where he would receive structured supervision and counseling. The alternative was being sent to a residential treatment center. All parties agreed and the youth remained in school. Follow-up showed the youth to have made a satisfactory adjustment and there were no further legal involvement.

How to Start a School-Court Liaison Project

The Cambridge model worked through eight preliminary steps in setting-up its liaison project. They suggest:

Step 1 - Collect Data on the Types and Extent of the Problems

The first step in establishing a school-court linkage is to assess the delinquency, truancy and drop-out rates in the school and the community. Talk with teachers, counselors, administrators, and probation officers and determine the extent of the problems. Discover which school staff have advocated, if at all, for court-involved students and which school staff have, if at all, brought students to court for truancy or for being habitual school offenders.

Data used to define the problem can be collected from those involved with the problem (e.g., school staff who have referred or gone to court with students), from data maintained by the probation department, or from other community agencies who have interest in such information. In Cambridge, a Criminal Justice Agency had collected extensive data on delinquency patterns which offered a clearer understanding of the problem.

Step 2 - Learn About the School Staff and Students

Look at the list of youths referred to the court and school attendance records. Many times the court-involved students do not attend school regularly or at all. Teachers and administrators often do not notice that truant students and students involved in other serious discipline problems, are often the same students who are involved in the courts. In Cambridge, the schools' records for bringing students before the court for truancy or for habitual school offenses was poor.

Step 3 - Learn About the Court

The regulation of the juvenile justice system is complex. Throughout the nation, the regulation of juvenile writs is statutory and vested in the state legislature. However, while all states regulate their own laws regarding juveniles, the laws are not necessarily the same from state to state.

Step 4 - Establish Conditions for Juvenile Court Referrals

Most juvenile courts have a range of social and psychological services which are open to youth, and when appropriate, to their families. Each school should establish conditions for court referrals, such as chronic truancy, violation of school rules, or violation of state or local law. Schools may also wish to refer a student to the courts if the student is in need of care and protection. In Cambridge, a school official who suspects child abuse or neglect must report the situation to the court according to the law.

Step 5 - Establish a Contact Person on the Court Staff

A court resource person who is available to the school officials is very important for the success of the program. In Cambridge, the Chief Probation Officer and his staff have proven very helpful and supportive.

Step 6 - Pinpoint School-Court Communication Problems

One way of understanding the causes of isolation and lack of sharing between the school and court is to communicate with the people that work in both agencies. For example, at CRLS several school staff originally met with the court staff as they worked to set up the liaison program. At this meeting, the court staff identified a common barrier to good school-court cooperation. The probation officers indicated their frustration of dealing with too many different people from the school and not having a dependable resource person from the school whom they could contact when necessary. Also, they were dissatisfied with the school's failure to complete and to return school record reports for students who are court involved.

Step 7 - Be Prepared to Address Issues of Confidentiality

School records that contain court and discipline types of information are typically protected by state and federal laws (e.g., The Buckley Amendment). While students and parents often have access to this information, no other persons can be allowed to read school records without written permission from the respective student. At CRLS the liaison may discuss the confidential information, in summary form, with a counselor or teacher who may have a special working relationship with the student. But, in general, the school's record of the court referral and activities with such a student should be considered confidential.

Step 8 - Determine Exactly What the Goals and Tasks of the School-Court Liaison Are and Get the Staff Members Started

At CRLS interest in providing liaison services centers around creating an advocacy service for court-involved students as a dropout and truancy prevention measure. While the specific goals and tasks of the CRLS liaison were detailed previously in "The Solution" section, this model may be adapted and modified to fit the specific needs of any school.

Results

Throughout the first year of the School-Court Liaison Program, positive comments have come from the court, parents, the principal and superintendent, and students. A formal survey of the effectiveness of the operation is planned for the Spring of 1980. However, existing caseload information supports the success of the project. For example, from an active caseload of 50 court-referred students who were placed on probation and returned to the school, only three have had subsequent referrals back to court. The balance of students appear to be making a satisfactory adjustment in school. Approximately 80% are under active supervision by the school counselor and 20% returned to what CRLS calls a self-contained program. This program--"The Enterprise Cooperative"--teaches restaurant skills and basic academics. Students in this program are involved in running a sub-shop in which they share the profits.

Replication Issues

A school-court liaison project can be structured or organized according to the needs of the particular school. The liaison position may or may not be a full-time position in the school. In Cambridge, the liaison person is released from all teaching duties and works as a teacher-advisor and directs the Student Service Center. The Center conducts programs aimed at dropout prevention and community building within the school.

Required Resources

The major costs of the project are for the release time of the liaison staff member. Additionally, the liaison needs an office, phone, supplies, and secretarial support. At Cambridge, the liaison is housed in an office in the Student Service Center, and receives clerical coverage from the Center.